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—
Chair

The Honourable Hedy Fry

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•(1105)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.)): Good morning, everyone. As you can see, we have a large lineup today of witnesses.

Good morning, and welcome. I wanted you to know that each witness normally has 10 minutes to present, and then there are questions from the members of Parliament. However, because there are so many of you, if you could scoot down to eight minutes, it would really help. Thank you very much.

We're going to start with Ms. Harper of the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre.

Ms. Lucille Harper (Executive Director, Antigonish Women's Resource Centre): Eight minutes, all right. I think what I'll do then is probably start with the recommendations and then try to move to the context.

First, what I'd like to say is how pleased I am to be here on behalf of the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre and to have an opportunity to speak to the realities of the life of women in some of our very rural east coast communities, women who are struggling to keep their families together and their communities alive, and for whom the employment insurance system is really not working well. So I really feel I need to give you a bit of context for the lives of women in rural Nova Scotia, but I really do want to get to the recommendations first.

In preparing this brief, I spoke with women working primarily in women's centres and other women's organizations that provide services in rural communities. One of our recommendations is that the EI system and EI programs are better recognized and become a more integral part of the social safety net if they address the poverty of women head-on, because without that, we're really dealing in a very piecemeal way with systems that are not supporting women in our rural communities.

I think the other question we have to ask ourselves is, do we want our rural communities to survive? And if we do, then we have to start to pay attention. But right now, we're not paying attention to our rural communities. If we want our rural communities to survive, then we have to understand the role that women play in those rural communities; it's integral, absolutely integral, in holding together family and community. Women do hundreds of hours of unpaid work in communities that are increasingly under-serviced and increasingly losing their infrastructure, and that are losing the types of good-paying jobs that women were doing. As I say, it's becoming increasingly difficult.

So one of the things we would like to suggest right off the top is that it's time for Canada to consider the implementation of a universal guaranteed livable income program, of which the EI system and EI programs are primary pieces.

We need to set the threshold for EI eligibility at 360 hours for everyone. What we're finding in our rural communities is that women are working casual, part-time, low-paid jobs and they're not eligible for EI. They can't even enter the EI system because it's so difficult to amass the number of hours required to enter it.

We need to provide benefits at a rate that is 65% of the best 12 weeks of someone's earnings, because what's happening with women is that as employment peters out and they're doing two and three jobs, then often their last 12 weeks of earnings are their worst 12 weeks. So when they're doing low-paid work, the last 12 weeks are their worst 12 weeks—and then they're only receiving 55% of that income. They're living at a level very significantly below the poverty line.

So what we also want to see is that EI be set at a rate that is at least 10% above the low-income cut-off for any given region. If we're setting it lower than that, then what we're saying as a Canadian society is that it's okay for people to be living in poverty, that we're cool with it. So if we aren't happy with that, then we have to set an EI rate that is at least 10% above the low-income cut-off.

We need to provide benefits to a maximum of 52 weeks in all regions, including areas where unemployment is above the national average. And believe me, in rural Nova Scotia it has been significantly above the national average during our boom times. So now what's happening when we're going into an economic recession is that it's again increasing significantly. So we need to increase the benefit period accordingly.

●(1110)

We need to ensure that there are sufficient programs in place so that retraining programs are accessible to the women living in rural under-serviced areas. When we have retraining programs that are town-centred and we don't have public transportation systems, women can't get to these programs. In rural communities, particularly with low-income families, they're dependent upon cars for transportation. Often those cars are older cars requiring high maintenance, and often there's one car per family. So when you have to get to a retraining program in one town and child care in another town, and you have one family vehicle, and your partner—if you do have a partner—is working in another town, then it's virtually impossible to access retraining programs. We really have to think this through with a rural lens.

One of our suggestions is that we make summer student programs accessible to all students regardless of age, so that women who are going back for retraining and trying to upgrade their skills can get some experience through summer work in the same way as under-30 students can. Also, we need to look at making some of these opportunities available to women who are over 55 so that they can access some of the summer student programs in the same way as students can, particularly when they're seeking to try to upgrade their skills so they can re-enter the workforce.

We want you to develop and implement a federal poverty reduction strategy that uses a rural lens and is grounded in providing for the social as well as the economic well-being of people in communities, and to establish a poverty line that accounts for transportation and the additional cost of living in rural and isolated areas of Canada. When we're looking at EI, particularly if we are saying, okay, we need that to be 10% above the low-income cut-off.... The low-income cut-off doesn't include transportation. As I said, when you're living in a rural community and you're car dependent, that's really expensive, and it needs to be thought through and included in that.

We want to forgive student debt. What we're seeing right now in our rural communities is that in rural Nova Scotia we're already coming from a province that has been substantially poorer than many of the other provinces in Canada, so family income is low. The average income is below the median income, and unemployment is higher. We have the highest student tuition in our universities in the country. Students who are struggling to try to get to university are coming out with massive debts. It's very difficult for them to stay in the province. They end up leaving for the west. That needs to be integrated in an overall plan.

The other thing is that we need to provide current, insightful, independent research that is specific to rural communities and specific to women in marginalized groups living in rural communities. We need to ensure that policies and programs introduced to stimulate employment are linked to improving women's equality.

I hope you have a copy of this, because what I want to say about rural Nova Scotia is that we've been in a situation where we have been able to take advantage of the prosperity in the west and in Ontario by sending our families and our workers west. Well, now our workers are returning home, and they're returning home to no employment and no employment possibilities.

●(1115)

The Chair: You have one minute.

Ms. Lucille Harper: Okay.

Unless we figure out a way to address this, if they're eligible for EI—and some are, while some aren't—that is going to run out very quickly, and we have no strategy for our east coast communities. We've lost our fisheries, we've lost our primary industries, we've lost our mining, we've closed Hawker Siddeley in Pictou County. We're really struggling right now.

My concern is that Nova Scotia has never really been a priority. Nova Scotia, I think, is reflective of other rural communities, and we need to make it a priority, because if we can make it work in our rural communities, we can make it work for the rest of Canada.

I plead with you at this time to not forget women, to not forget women in the rural communities, and to understand the complexity of women's struggles and women's lives.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Harper.

Ms. Denise Page of the Canadian Cancer Society.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Denise Page (Health Policy Analyst, Canadian Cancer Society): Good morning. I will try to be brief.

On behalf of its 170,000 volunteers, those who have cancer and their loved ones, the Canadian Cancer Society welcomes this opportunity to address the issue of employment insurance special benefits, which include sickness benefits and compassionate care benefits. A special thank-you for this opportunity, especially when daffodil month will begin tomorrow. The daffodil is a well-recognized beacon in the fight against cancer.

Our recommendations to increase the benefit period for both sickness benefits and compassionate care benefits. In the case of compassionate care benefits, we also recommend making certain conditions more flexible.

I will start with compassionate care benefits and give you a quick snapshot of who are caregivers. We know that 77% of caregivers are women and that 22% had to miss one or more months of work in the past year. Twenty-two per cent of women caregivers had to change their work patterns as a result of caregiving, and 14.5% reduced their work hours for the same reason. Between 2002 and 2007, the number of caregivers aged 45 and older increased by 30%. If this is not an issue now, it very soon will be.

Why must the compassionate care benefit be revised and improved? First, the compassionate care benefit is a labour policy intended to alleviate the financial burden on workers eligible for employment insurance who take leave to care for a seriously ill and dying loved one.

The employment insurance eligibility criteria are cause for concern because to date, 97% of compassionate care benefit claimants have been women. I already said that 77% of caregivers are women. As well, 70% of part-time workers are women. Because they are already working part-time, it is often women who will provide care for a seriously ill loved one. Yet at the point when that person most needs palliative care as he or she approaches the end of life, these women are often no longer eligible for compassionate care leave as they do not have the required 600 hours of work over the previous six months. That is the first point I want to make.

The second point concerns the compassionate care benefit period, which is six weeks in length, not including the two-week waiting period. We are told that the period is much too short. For many people caring for cancer patients, this period does not give them enough time to submit a claim, or when they do submit a claim, it is too late. In any case, they do not have access to benefits.

Human Resources and Skills Development data prove that the benefit period is not long enough. Thirty per cent of people who received compassionate care benefits subsequently had to receive other benefits, such as sickness or regular benefits.

Another problem related to the short benefit period is benefit sharing. This is a great initiative in theory, because its intention is that the burden will not rest on the shoulders of only one person. The problem is that six weeks is not enough. For example, where a child is ill, the father and mother each get three weeks, when their child is going to die.

Another statistic shows that six weeks is not enough. More than 90% of people who received compassionate care benefits did not share them. It is hard to share six weeks.

Another problematic aspect of compassionate care leave is obtaining medical proof that the person is going to die in the next six months. There are various problems with this requirement, including the unpredictability of death. I have not yet met anyone who can predict with certainty that someone is going to die. A person can still be alive five years after getting a diagnosis that he or she is going to die in three months. That can be very difficult.

I will stop here with regard to compassionate care leave.

● (1120)

Why is 15 weeks of sickness benefits not long enough for cancer patients? Let us take the example of breast cancer, which primarily affects women. In 2008, the incidence of breast cancer was 22,600 cases, which means that 22,600 women had to face surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy. That can easily take a year.

I will explain how I got that figure. First, there are delays in surgery, which vary with surgical availabilities. After surgery, there is a rest period before patients start chemotherapy. Patients receive chemotherapy in four to six cycles every 21 or 28 days for three to six months.

After chemotherapy comes radiotherapy, which is administered for four to six weeks. But in Canada, some people have to wait eight to 12 weeks, depending on the treatment centre, before they can start their treatment.

When a later breast reconstruction is requested, the time for treatment is longer. I will not even go into the time a woman needs for physical, psychological and social rehabilitation, because that varies from one woman to another. It is clear to the Canadian Cancer Society that 15 weeks of sickness benefits are not enough for cancer patients.

In conclusion, you will understand why the Canadian Cancer Society is asking the committee to increase the benefit period for both compassionate care benefits and sickness benefits and, in the case of compassionate care benefits, to make certain conditions more flexible.

Thank you.

● (1125)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[English]

Next is Neil Cohen, from the Community Unemployed Help Centre.

Mr. Neil Cohen (Executive Director, Community Unemployed Help Centre): I'll try to be attentive to the clock. I'll just tell you a bit about the Unemployed Help Centre.

We are a small local organization based in Winnipeg, so many of you will perhaps not be familiar with the work we do. We were created in 1980 and we are a non-profit, community-based organization that assists unemployed workers by providing information, advice, and representation on appeals. So we have a very narrow focus, but we've acquired considerable expertise because organizations such as the Community Unemployed Help Centre are few and far between in Canada, and we are the only one in Manitoba.

Let me go back to when the Employment Insurance Act came into law in 1996. We have a large national network of people we consult with on a regular basis, both representatives of non-profit organizations that do EI representation and also a number of lawyers we work with who are involved in charter issues. We held a national consultation in 1996 to assess the potential impact of the EI Act and to develop a possible legal challenge under section 15.

We felt the legislation would be detrimental to most workers, but that it would have a disproportionate impact on women and therefore offend section 15 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. So we developed this nice case theory. We said we felt it would be bad for most workers, and I am sure most members of the committee will be aware that the eligibility requirements increased dramatically under the Employment Insurance Act. Previously, under the weeks-based system, one could qualify for maternity benefits or sickness benefits, for example, by working 15 hours a week for 20 weeks, the equivalent of 300 hours, but the EI Act and the weeks-based system at the time of its passage required that worker to work for 700 hours. So we see this at every single benefit period where there's a dramatic spike in the number of hours required to qualify.

So we developed a case theory. We thought this could be supported by data, but we didn't have a client. One does not advertise for a client to change legislation. Fortunately, we were contacted by Kelly Lesiuk, and I think you're probably all familiar with the Lesiuk case. It was the lead case nationally for which we take a great measure of pride. Kelly Lesiuk had relocated to Winnipeg from Brandon, Manitoba. She had over 10 years of nursing experience. She was four months pregnant at the time she relocated. She had a three-year-old child and another on the way. She came to Winnipeg and, while seeking employment, applied for EI benefits and was told she didn't qualify because she had 667 hours of employment in the last 52 weeks and required 700 under the new EI Act.

We do a lot of work with the Public Interest Law Centre of Legal Aid Manitoba, and PILC agreed to take the Lesiuk case. We took the case all the way to the Federal Court of Appeal. We won before the umpire, but that decision was later overturned by the Federal Court of Appeal, unfortunately. Courts make decisions that we don't always think are the right decisions, and certainly we found that the decision in the lower court was more in line with our thinking than the one at the Federal Court of Appeal.

Nevertheless, although we didn't get a remedy through the courts, it's generally conceded that the Lesiuk case influenced a change in legislation and reduced the number of hours required to qualify for special benefits from 700 hours to 600 hours. So we were certainly pleased that it was a step in the right direction.

I am not going to recite data at great length, because I know you have heard from Kevin Hayes and Monica Towson, and we're all using a lot of the same reports. I have to tell you that as a member of the CLC's UI committee, along with Kevin Hayes, I was one of the principal architects of some of the recommendations you have heard previously and will hear again today.

So let me just state at the outset that although the recommendations we put forward in the brief are fairly general, we specifically recommend an increase in the benefit rate to 60%. We certainly would recommend an increase in compassionate care benefits to at least 12 weeks.

• (1130)

On that front once again, I must tell you that shortly after the compassionate care legislation was passed into law, my brother was diagnosed with terminal cancer. I was the test case, and my brother was the test case. We followed the tried-and-true pattern of Lesiuk, and my case was generally conceded to be responsible for a

broadening of the definition of family for eligibility purposes. We're certainly pleased with that and wish to commend the previous government for bringing in the EI compassionate care benefits.

However, that said, six weeks is certainly problematic for two reasons. Of particular interest to this committee, the uptake of compassionate care is largely by women. Six weeks is problematic, and it forces people, as Denise mentioned, to kind of be on a death watch and determine when within that six-week window the family member is likely to die, because you don't want to take the benefits too early, and you don't want to take the benefits too late. We would call for a recommendation to increase the duration to at least 15 weeks.

You have copies of my brief, so I'm just going to refer you to that. Suffice it to say that there has certainly been a lot of data that talk about the differential impact of EI legislation on women. This is largely influenced and consequential to the fact that women represent such a large part of the workforce. One thing we learned from Lesiuk is that when you look at a 52-week window to determine whether or not one qualifies, this creates problems.

I just want to give you one illustration. Kelly Lesiuk, with her 10 years of nursing experience, failed to qualify for benefits because she didn't accumulate sufficient hours in the 52 weeks prior to her application. Someone could be new to the workforce, a 16-year-old—with all due respect to youth—who has never worked before. They go and find a job, work somewhere for 900 hours, and qualify for benefits. This, to me, is evidence of the fact that this program is fundamentally flawed in that regard. It also sends this message to women, as it did with Kelly Lesiuk: I'm sorry, but the legislation, in the way it's currently constructed, does not value your labour force participation. That's a strong message that I wouldn't want to leave with the committee.

The recommendations, as I mentioned, are contained.... I think my eight minutes is about up, but this is important. When drafting legislation, and if there are going to be amendments to the act, I would really ask that you put them to the test to assess the gender impact and to develop legislation recommendations that are certainly sensitive to and responsive to women's participation in the labour force. In 1940 when the act was first passed into law, only 42% of workers were covered. There was a very different labour market in 1942. Women were not working in 1942 to the same extent as they are now. Work patterns have changed. The 1940 act was very much an actuarial exercise, and it measured how much money was coming in and how much money was going out. There have been some changes reflecting more of an actuarial sort of guideline to the program, I would argue, than the changing and merging of social realities, including the increased participation of women in the labour force.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cohen. You actually came in well under time.

Now from the Council of Canadians with Disabilities, we have Marie White.

● (1135)

Ms. Marie White (National Chairperson, Council of Canadians with Disabilities): Thank you very much.

Many of the issues I will bring forward have been raised already; however, the context of disability always adds an additional layer of difficulty to it. I will say that I echo Lucille Harper's comments around women in rural areas. I come from Newfoundland, so the issues are paramount for me as well. However, I will put on my disability hat and speak to that.

I'm compelled to note at the outset that for people with disabilities—women in particular—labour market policy is not really their main priority, and if you look at the statistics on unemployment and lack of attachment to the labour force for people with disabilities, it becomes clear why. Many of the people in my community, that of people with disabilities, live in poverty. We know that according to the International Labour Organization the annual loss of global GDP due to exclusion of people with disabilities from the labour market is between, in American dollars, \$1.94 trillion and \$1.73 trillion. So we are an underutilized resource.

One of the reasons we are, particularly in Canada, is that from my perspective, social policy is homeless in this government. We know that no one disputes the fact that Canadians with disabilities are, by virtue of their size, massively unemployed. They disproportionately live in poverty. We face discrimination on a daily basis. For women with disabilities, it adds an additional layer to all of the adversity that we face, but we still have no clear plan to address the substantive inequities that we face. If social policy is not seen to be the key function of a federal government, then what we have are the issues I just articulated, and I'm hoping the work of this committee is a signal that perhaps some of it will get the needed attention.

Approximately two million women, or 13% of all women in Canada, have disabilities. That's a large group of people, many of whom are unemployed. We know that women have a lower economic status than men. Well, women with disabilities have even a lower economic status. So again, there's the first barrier that you encounter.

We know that women's caregiving is largely unpaid. That has been addressed; however, often it's forgotten that women with disabilities can also be caregivers. I'm a single mother of two children. I assure you I'm their primary caregiver. We know that women have unequal access to capital, to land and borrowing opportunities, and we know that job segregation continues. For women with disabilities, again, we know that in the labour force they have a preponderance in the area of sales, service, and administration. Management is a ceiling for us.

We know that women with disabilities tend to have less education, which creates the barriers to the workforce. The most recent statistic we have is that the unemployment rate for women with disabilities is almost 75%, and I would suggest to you that's a national disgrace.

Many Canadian women pay no income tax, either because their work is unpaid or their income from paid work is too low, and many women have incomes that fall into the lowest tax bracket. So from my perspective, if we look at a government whose vehicle of choice for progress is often tax and the tax system, then once again we are excluded. So from that perspective, we believe that EI is a very important instrument in a public policy regime. In this time of recession it really doesn't matter what your stripe is or where you live or from where you come; EI is important to you. Since the beginning of this economic downturn we as a community of people with disabilities continue to say that it is the most vulnerable who require even more protection in this kind of environment. We know that EI is not accessible and inclusive for women with disabilities.

The Kelly Lesiuk case has already been referenced, but I think it's worth repeating it. I'm sure you've heard already what the EI umpire expressed in the case. It was said:

...the eligibility requirements demean the essential human dignity of women who predominate in the part-time labour force because they must work for longer periods than full-time workers in order to demonstrate their labour force attachment.... Since women continue to spend approximately twice as much time doing unpaid work as men, women are predominantly affected. Thus, the underlying message is that, to enjoy equal benefits of law, women must become more like men by increasing their hours of paid work, notwithstanding their unpaid responsibilities.

And I don't think there's a woman in this room who would say that they don't have a significant amount of unpaid responsibility.

● (1140)

Our recommendations are very similar to those you've heard already, perhaps with a new twist. We would suggest that the Government of Canada bring more women, particularly women with disabilities, into standardized employment with social benefits. We would like to improve access for women who have non-standard employment practices.

Now I would like to speak briefly to the sickness benefits issue. For women in my community, it's not just chronic illness but episodic disabilities. If I am a woman who has MS, I may need to be off for six months. Fifteen weeks doesn't cut it. Like those who are at the end of life—and we are looking at compassionate care—I'm sorry, but I can't put myself on a schedule. Nor can any other woman who has a chronic illness or an episodic disability in regard to when it may or may not hit, so therefore it is of great importance to us.

Also, we believe the government should expand the acceptable reasons for voluntarily leaving jobs and remove the penalties on subsequent claims. I was the deputy mayor of the city of St. John's, my children were five and six, and I left to take care of my children—unlike being turfed out, I actually left—because they were both going to be in school, in kindergarten and grade 1. Of course, there's a whole other issue around EI when you're in those positions. Regardless of that fact, I left voluntarily to do something that was important to me. If I had been in paid work of a different ilk, I would have been penalized for it.

When we look at Canadians with disabilities, one of the most important things is that we already have significant overarching legislation to protect us. With the onset of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, we are hopeful that government will look even more broadly at the issues that impact people with disabilities, and the EI system is one.

I'll conclude by saying that CCD and the broader disability community have endorsed a national action plan on disability. I have copies here. It sets out four key areas for needed action. They are interrelated. You cannot have one without the other.

There is the eradication of poverty, which requires access to disability-related supports. It requires unencumbered—and I'll say it again, unencumbered—access to employment and the full range of more responsive EI benefits, which do not exist at this time. We seek a social fabric that includes and respects all, and EI is a thread in this fabric.

We know that Canada is a country where we should all live in dignity. We know that Canada is a country where having a disability does not mean and should never mean that you will live your whole life in poverty. What we seek is parity and inclusion, not charity and exclusion.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. White.

From the Nova Scotia Centre on Aging, we have Pamela Fancey.

Ms. Pamela Fancey (Associate Director, Nova Scotia Centre on Aging): Thank you for the opportunity to share with you information about the policy analysis work that I and my colleague Dr. Janice Keefe, from Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, have been involved in.

This research focuses on one benefit of the employment insurance program, namely, the compassionate care benefit. Our review of this benefit was originally part of a larger program of research on financial initiatives intended to support family and friend caregivers of older adults.

In addition to policies such as the CCB, we have reviewed initiatives that provide direct cash payments and stipends, tax policy, and pension schemes. We recognize that the CCB is not limited to the older population, but based on our work, and for the purposes of this presentation, that is our focus.

As you are likely aware, the Canadian population is aging. While this is a success story, there comes with it the need to rethink how we as a society currently support our older population to ensure that we are well positioned to meet the needs of our older citizens and their

families. At the same time, there is concern about Canada's labour force, with much attention in all sectors on recruitment and retention of employees. Part of this discussion should now be on how we can support employees to balance work and family care responsibilities.

In 2007, 2.7 million family and friend caregivers, aged 45 years and older, assisted a senior because of the senior's long-term health problems. Nearly six in ten of these middle-aged caregivers were women. Further, more than half of this group, or 1.5 million, provided assistance to a senior while also being employed.

Numerous studies have documented the costs and consequences of juggling caregiving and employment responsibilities on women's short- and long-term financial security, employment status, health, and well-being. And while these national data that I quote do not speak specifically to palliative care cases, I feel they provide a valuable context on the issue of work and elder care and the importance of this issue to working women.

As you know, the compassionate care benefit was implemented in 2004 as a means of addressing some of the employment impacts on Canadians who leave work to support gravely ill family members. From an HR policy context, it has the potential to retain employees who otherwise may have to leave the labour force during this difficult time in their lives, because it enables an employee who has a dying relative and who would be eligible for employment insurance benefits to take leave from the workplace for up to eight weeks and receive partial income replacement for up to six weeks.

So the CCB is a positive first step towards supporting employees. Our comparison work of similar policies in other jurisdictions, however, we feel, can inform and strengthen Canada's compassionate care benefit. In 2004-05, we conducted a systematic and in-depth review of family care leave policies in Sweden, Japan, Norway, the Netherlands, and California to understand the scope and specific parameters of these programs, and then we compared them to Canada's compassionate care benefit. These policies provided income support for employees on leave from the workplace, and the nature of the leave included critical or terminal illness.

It should be noted that every jurisdiction reported similar gender differences in the utilization rates of these programs, with women being the primary program users. Underlying reasons why women represent 70% to 80% of the users of this program are embedded in societal expectations and employment economics.

So what did we learn from this comparison? We learned a number of things, but I'll share with you a few specific findings related to eligibility criteria and the value of the benefit, as these are suggested to impact access to the benefit and the consequences of utilizing this benefit.

Regarding eligibility criteria, we found that there are usually criteria, which include employment, relationship, proximity, and definition of the illness, that have to be met for an employee to be eligible. However, these eligibility criteria varied across the jurisdictions we reviewed, some being more liberal than others, resulting in implications in terms of access and utility of the program.

For example, at the time of our research, for Canadians to access the CCB they must have met the general requirements for the EI program: 600 insured hours in the past 52 weeks. Japan, whose program is also embedded in a national employment insurance scheme, has similar qualifying employment criteria. Because Canada's and Japan's benefit is embedded in the country's employment insurance scheme, this limits accessibility to those whose labour force participation is regular and full-time. That is less likely to be women, and less likely if they are simultaneously managing family care responsibilities. These noted exclusions do not exist in Sweden, Norway, or California, where eligibility is extended to all workers, including part-time and self-employed, provided that they have contributed to a national social insurance program, as is the case in Sweden and Norway, or state disability insurance benefits, as is the case in California.

• (1145)

Other criteria include the relationship of the employee to the dying individual. After a change to Canada's CCB in 2006, eligibility was expanded to include extended family members such as siblings, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. This is consistent with the reality of Canada's changing family and the support networks of older adults, making the benefit accessible to a wider group of employees.

In addition, there is special provision for the employee to also receive the benefit if they are non-kin but considered to be family. Other jurisdictions have similar relationship criteria. In the case of Japan, the employee and relative have to co-reside. Sweden's leave is the most inclusive of all we reviewed. There, employees with a dying family member, friend, or neighbour are automatically eligible without any special provision.

With respect to defining illness, Canada's CCB definition of the term "gravely ill" is considered stringent and the process cumbersome in comparison to other jurisdictions. In Canada the employee's relative must be at risk of dying within 26 weeks and need a medical certificate to that effect signed by a physician. This can at times be difficult to assess, given the sometimes unpredictable nature of the dying process, thereby making it difficult for employees to know when to apply for the leave and when to take the leave itself.

California's policy does not include reference to death or dying. It uses "serious health condition", which is defined as any illness, injury, or physical or mental condition that involves in-patient care in a hospital, hospice, or health care facility. So while the condition is serious, there does not need to be imminent death.

Similarly in Japan, for employees with a relative whose condition requires constant care for two weeks or more due to injury, sickness, or physical or mental disability, the definition does not include "death" or "dying". At the same time, the Japanese policy may be considered more stringent than Canada's CCB because of the need for a Japanese employee to be providing constant care.

Likewise, Norway's policy identifies at-home care. While direct care is often being provided by family members, it is not required to access the benefit, nor is there a specific venue identified.

In comparison, Canada's policy may be used to support care in either a community or institutional setting. While the CCB is limiting by its "dying" criteria, the fact that it does not stipulate care itself or the venue is considered a strength of the policy as it can encompass the full spectrum of employees, from those who provide emotional support to those who actually perform physical care, regardless of living arrangements.

In addition to eligibility criteria, another important consideration in understanding the utility of a benefit such as CCB, especially for women, is the actual value of the benefit itself. This can include whether it is considered taxable income, continuation of fringe benefits, job protection, and the right to leave. At the time of our research, Canada's CCB provided the right to leave, job protection, and income replacement of 55% of an employee's regular income up to a weekly maximum of \$413, following a two-week unpaid waiting period. Contributions to other social protection benefits such as EI and CPP are suspended during this leave.

Because gender inequities in wages persist, with women continuing to earn, on average, less than men, it makes economic sense for the female worker, rather than the male worker, to reduce her income, as it will be the least disadvantage for the overall household. Depending on one's salary and the importance of the employee's income to the household, being limited to \$400 per week may prohibit them from accessing the leave, may result in employees drawing on savings to supplement their leave, or may place some families' financial security at risk.

• (1150)

The Chair: You have one minute.

Ms. Pamela Fancey: Thank you.

The benefit within California's program is similar to Canada's in that employees receive compensation for 55% to 60% of their regular employment income. There is a one-week unpaid waiting period, and it's taxable only at the federal level, whereas our CCB income is considered totally taxable income at both the federal and provincial levels, thereby reducing the value of the benefit.

Sweden provides the more generous entitlement, up to 80% of regular employment income, and they also continue to contribute to their pension plan and their other social insurance protections. Norway's compensation equals 100% of gross wage income, to a maximum benefit three times that of Canada's.

There are also other issues with respect to job protection and right to leave, which I will bypass for now.

This comparative analysis provides insights into the strengths and limitations, and the consequences and effects on women, as they are widely recognized as the primary providers of family care. Many women who provide support and care to seriously ill family members, short-term and long-term, do not benefit from this public policy because of its "dying" definition. Women with non-regular labour force participation are unable to benefit from this public policy because it is situated within the EI program and uses the regular EI employment criteria. Women's short- and long-term financial security may be jeopardized because of the low monetary value and maximum ceiling of the benefit itself.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Heinrichs.

Mrs. Verna Heinrichs (As an Individual): I'm a farm woman, specializing in assistance to women and their families in regard to immigration and settlement services, employment, finance, education, and health care. This kaleidoscope of experience in itself demonstrates that farm women often have to become chameleons to survive in the long term. These examples demonstrate the utmost necessity of multitasking, along with an evolution of career changes. I feel I can talk the talk because I have walked the walk.

The 2009 federal budget presented by finance minister Jim Flaherty on January 27 will provide billions of dollars for infrastructure such as rural high-speed Internet, bridges and roads repair, replacement of community sports and recreation complexes, and upgrades for colleges and universities. These funds will generate a plethora of jobs and opportunities for women and their families throughout their regions. I have seen many women managing the offices and involved in the administration as well as the day-to-day operations of the construction companies and other businesses required to build this infrastructure. Many construction companies and sub-trades, especially in rural areas, are owned and operated by families. Women and their spouses and families are the net benefactors of this budget stimulus package.

This federal government has been working to advance the contribution of women entrepreneurs to the Canadian economy. To ease the start-up challenges of new businesses, the federal government has taken steps to promote initiatives that assist women entrepreneurs. This has been achieved by granting employment insurance coverage for the first year of business start-up—and in some cases longer—to help overcome the initial challenges of new businesses. For example, I have recently been working with a woman who had been employed with a kitchen manufacturing firm. As a direct result of the EI coverage, coupled with a business start-up plan, she has been able to start her own home design and decorating business.

I know of teachers, nurses, estheticians, chefs, and others who have benefited from the 15 weeks of employment insurance coverage for maternity leave and the 35 weeks of parental benefits through the EI program. This financial assistance is invaluable for women and their families, and spouses sometimes share part of this time off from work to help with the needs of a newborn and a growing family. The universal child care benefit, the \$100-per-month allowance per child under the age of six, is a welcome income for mothers who choose to stay at home to raise a young family.

A young immigrant mother I know, who is a graduate-degree nurse in her home country, decided this monthly income would enable her to stay at home to raise her two children while also brushing up on her studies to write her nursing exam in Canada when the children were old enough to attend school and she would be ready to return to work. In the economic action plan, the government will provide \$50 million over two years for a national foreign credential recognition framework. From my experience in working with settlement services, I cannot fully express in this short time how helpful this funding will be.

For example, while working with immigrant women, I encountered many women who had professional designations in their country of origin and who needed to have their credentials recognized in Canada. In the action plan, the government will increase, from \$400,000 to \$500,000, the amount of small business income eligible for the reduced federal tax rate of 11%.

I have worked with an immigrant woman who has set up a small business as a support to help other immigrant women and their families with the immigration process, resource referral, and various ongoing supports. Since this business is somewhat difficult to quantify in actual financial projections, financial institutions were reluctant to make any business start-up loans or operating loans, resulting at times in a cash deficiency. In instances such as these, the increased level for the reduced tax rate frees up operating capital needed to continue in business, thus giving small businesses a better chance to succeed. In ways such as these, the federal government is recognizing and enhancing the strength of small business contributions to the very backbone of the Canadian economy.

●(1155)

In my experience, providing EI to self-employed workers is a bit of a tricky issue. First, it is extremely difficult to determine whether or not somebody has been laid off, because the employer and the employee are the same person. This situation has posed a policy issue for many countries.

Another issue is that many self-employed workers would much rather put their money into other resources than into an EI insurance program.

Also, our government has made some exciting changes to the Status of Women. One of those changes is increased funding to the women's program. We've increased funding by 42%, bringing it to the highest level ever. This announcement was just made two weeks ago.

Another change that I feel is very exciting to the women's program is the shifting focus to provide funding to grassroots organizations across the country. Over \$1.3 million in funding has been allotted to groups in Alberta and British Columbia, and these groups have the expertise in the specific issues that uniquely offer assistance to women in their communities. I would like to advise that these groups assisting women would be fortified in other areas, coming further west, of Alberta and British Columbia for women who have their fingers on the pulse of what's happening in their communities.

Also, through the strategic training and transition fund, the government is increasing funding to provinces and territories for training and support measures that help individuals who do not qualify for EI training, including the self-employed.

Under the labour market agreements, Canada's government will invest \$500 million annually over the next six years—\$3 billion—to increase the quantity and enhance the quality of Canada's labour force. The investments will focus on supporting skills development for unemployed and low-skilled employed individuals who are not eligible for training assistance under the employment insurance program. In my line of work experience, I have seen many women who wanted to be retrained. With this funding, they will now have the resources to actually be retrained.

The World Health Organization has stated that with improved access to education for women, their children are much more likely to grow up achieving a higher education, better jobs, and an improved standard of living, ultimately resulting in decreased crime and an increased hope for the future. Innovation and learning have been identified as priorities for this federal government, as evidenced by their allocation of a portion of the billions of dollars in the recent federal budget for universities and colleges. There is an at-home grassroots awareness, where I come from, that over half—60%, to be exact—of the funding for colleges comes from the federal government. A continuation of the federal flow of resources for colleges and universities demonstrates the budgetary commitment of this federal government to post-secondary education.

In ways such as these, the federal government ensures that rural women are full participants in Canada's post-secondary education, business innovation policies, research and development, and technology agenda.

I have also had some involvement with rural immigrant women, as well as Canadian women, who have been or are currently recipients of employment insurance benefits while in the process of a career change for the duration of their full-time, day-program course. This system has proven to be invaluable to assist women and their families to regroup from within the throes of a financial upheaval as a result of a necessitated career change. Quite simply, employment insurance coupled with post-secondary education temporarily serves as a hand up, while facilitating the regaining by women and their families of their financial footing for the duration of laying the groundwork for a new career, thereby greatly increasing the marketability of their skills.

There is an old Chinese proverb that states: if you are thinking a year ahead, sow a seed; if you are thinking 10 years ahead, plant a tree; but if you are thinking 100 years ahead, educate the people. By sowing a seed, you will harvest once; by planting a tree, you will

harvest tenfold; by educating the people, you will harvest one hundredfold.

In short, what this federal Conservative government is doing to support the unemployed is investing in the future of Canadian women and their families. The steps they are taking to help families during this difficult time are certainly good news indeed.

● (1200)

The Chair: I'm sorry. You have 30 seconds left.

Mrs. Verna Heinrichs: Through my work, I have seen first-hand how these measures can make a very real and very positive difference and most certainly will benefit Canadians from coast to coast.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we will open the floor to questions, beginning with Ms. Neville for seven minutes.

Hon. Anita Neville (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Let me thank each and every one of you for coming here today. This is a full panel with a lot of information and a lot of varying perspectives that I'd like to follow up on.

We've certainly heard two very different pictures of life in rural Canada, and I want to follow up on that, but before I go to that I'd like to ask particularly you, Ms. Fancy, about the current compassionate care leave embedded in the EI program. Perhaps others would comment on it.

In this committee, we have looked at maternity benefits for self-employed workers. We know that Quebec has a stand-alone program. What I'm wondering is whether some of what might be described as auxiliary services, as opposed to employment insurance in its truest form, should be part of the EI program as we currently know it, or whether we should, as government, be looking at a stand-alone program for some of the additional services. I don't like to call them auxiliary services under the current EI program, but additional supports.

But don't take too long in answering, because I want to ask a question on rural life. I don't know who else might respond other than you, Ms. Fancy.

The Chair: I would like to say that the seven minutes allocated to Ms. Neville includes your answer.

● (1205)

Hon. Anita Neville: Thank you.

Ms. Pamela Fancy: Our work suggests that as well. This type of program embedded in the EI program is limited because of the criteria. It follows the regular EI employment criteria and is limited in that regard.

There was always a question as to how it ended up there to begin with, I guess, so our work does offer other models in terms of how we can think about supporting employees with care responsibilities, whether they're specific to palliative care or not, beyond the EI program.

Hon. Anita Neville: I'd like to hear if others have comments on it, but let me just ask you about the work you've done. You've done a summary of it. Would your work be available for our researcher to have a look at?

Ms. Pamela Fancey: Yes. I think we're making the fact sheet available.

Hon. Anita Neville: That would be excellent.

Does anybody else want to comment? Go ahead, Mr. Cohen.

Mr. Neil Cohen: It's an interesting idea to take the compassionate care out of the EI legislation. I just wouldn't want to see it put in a more vulnerable position. It's sort of nice when it's entrenched in a program that is a pillar of our social fabric in Canada.

Having said that, I'm sure that if there are to be recommendations, a question will come up, and this committee and members of Parliament will want to know what it's going to cost, so that becomes a problem. I have some concerns about the scope of the EI program at present because of the emphasis on lowering premiums over the last 20 years. We know that the government stopped contributing to EI in 1989, so I think the concern then becomes that if the intent is to increase compassionate care benefits within the scope of the EI Act, the fact that it's tied to collection of premiums might put some limitations on the will of governments to expand that program without having to increase premiums.

Hon. Anita Neville: Thank you.

Does anybody else want to comment on this? Ms. Page.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Denise Page: Under the employment insurance system, compassionate care benefits form part of an initial step in the strategy for caregivers. Another program needs to be developed, whether or not it is associated with employment insurance. Compassionate care benefits have existed for five years. We think they were a very good idea. They have shortcomings, but we can start with them and go from there.

I hope that answers your question.

[*English*]

Hon. Anita Neville: That's fine, thank you.

The Chair: You now have two minutes and forty seconds.

Hon. Anita Neville: Ms. Harper, I was quite taken with your presentation. I read your entire brief before I came to committee. You certainly painted a picture for rural women. You talk about making sure that "sufficient supports are in place to make retraining programs accessible to women". You have a number of recommendations here.

In regard to supports, we can't provide you with another car, but what kinds of supports do you mean—making training accessible in your communities, travel allowances, child care, family care? I don't know. What would make a difference in the lives of women as you know it?

Ms. Lucille Harper: I just want to say that there's not one rural woman. I am glad there are women who are doing well in rural communities, and I appreciate the opportunity to speak to the lives of those who are not. And I think it's all of what you've said. It would

be making things as flexible as possible so that the woman herself can look at her community, at what she may have access to, and then access it. So certainly it would be support for child care.

Transportation is a really large issue that needs to be dealt with. So certainly it would be doing more things online, providing different kinds of supports. I think in the community it's just being innovative around retraining. If there are women in a community who may be interested in the same program, let's see some study groups, with some tutoring attached to some online work through universities and community colleges. Let's encourage women to take up the kinds of occupations that are not low-paying. Often with the programs that women are funded to go into, they are going into occupations that are still low-paying, so we need to look at that as well.

It really requires going to the various areas and the different communities and really asking women what would help them get to where they need to go and then making a program that's flexible enough to help them do that.

• (1210)

Hon. Anita Neville: Would it help to tie the training to the individual rather than the offering of a program?

Ms. Lucille Harper: I think it would. Certainly, it's all of the other things that have been said too, whether it's making eligibility easier or recognizing that we need a program that is larger than the EI program that supports women in getting into training in the first place, when they have not been able to accumulate the hours, whether or not they've been working 10 years and paying into the system.

Hon. Anita Neville: You have a number of—

The Chair: Ms. Neville, I'm sorry, your time is up.

Ms. Deschamps.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for your testimony, everyone. With your expertise and knowledge, you have contributed a great deal to our study, which, I would remind you, concerns the employment insurance system. The system has been changed over the years. The program has been adjusted. It used to be called the unemployment insurance system, but now it is known as the employment insurance system. It is good to remember as well that only workers and employers pay into the system. I think it is important not to lose sight of that as we proceed with our study.

If one person gave a good description of the situation and sort of summed up all the testimony we have heard to date, it is Ms. Harper.

I think you illustrated the problem very well and put it very much in perspective. Witnesses have talked about compassionate care benefits, sickness benefits and the fact that the system needs to be changed to meet needs in the regions. I will tell you why. You talk about your region, the east coast. Two weeks ago, I toured the regions of Quebec. We have the same problems you mentioned today.

We know that the system generally discriminates against women. Yet women use compassionate care benefits and sickness benefits more than men. All the witnesses who have testified have said that the system is very discriminatory against women.

I have a question about that. Mr. Cohen, you represent a not-for-profit organization. I do not know how your organization is funded, but in order to defend workers, I would imagine that you need to consult a range of legal and other experts. You said during your testimony that you had turned to the court challenges program. That program has now been abolished.

How do you stand up for the rights of the people who consult you?

[English]

Mr. Neil Cohen: Certainly with great difficulty. In the case of Kelly Lesiuk, for example, we received up to \$50,000 in case funding. Although that didn't entirely cover all the legal costs, it was the maximum available under that program. So it certainly helped to influence the decision by Legal Aid as to whether or not they would proceed, because otherwise it would be a tremendous burden on them. Legal Aid has not declined any of our requests for test cases to date, but the money is borne entirely out of their budget and will create some difficulties for them.

I would anticipate that there could be a decline in the number of cases that come forward under the court challenges program, which very much depends on that.

Our core organization is funded through other means and not directly through the court challenges program, but the court challenges program did things like support our consultation and provide case funding in the case of Kelly Lesiuk.

[Translation]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: With regard to the situation in the regions, Ms. Harper, there is also the fact that young people and men are having to leave the regions. We know that women are still primarily responsible for looking after the family and the household while the men and young people are gone. In the regions, we also have a serious shortage of skilled labour, because these young people are moving to the major centres. So even though we are putting in place infrastructure programs to build housing in our regions—I am talking about my own—houses are empty and up for sale, so there is no construction. That is not stimulating the economy.

I might add that people have come here to tell us to change the employment insurance system so that most people can have access to it. In the current economic crisis, that would be one way to get the economy going.

Do you agree with me on that?

• (1215)

[English]

Ms. Lucille Harper: Yes, I agree with you. I think the problem, though, comes back to that question of whether we value our rural communities. If we do, we have to really look at what's happening there, including out-migration and the exodus of young people and, along with that, the resultant restructuring of family.

What's happening now in rural communities, particularly as it impacts women, is really significant, because women are trying to do not only paid work but all of the primary family care as well as all of the volunteer work in the community, and as well, they are trying to provide services that have left the community because of centralization and population-based policies. A lot of our thinking is urbanized. So the kinds of policies and solutions that we're coming up with are urban-centric, and they do not fit our rural communities well.

One of the things we have been thinking about and looking at is the possibility of something like a guaranteed annual income that would allow people to stay in communities and begin to rebuild communities because they could continue to afford to live there. Particularly when we are looking at some of the larger issues around trying to establish local food systems, etc., there are some possibilities now—

[Translation]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: Have you finished? I would like to take the 30 seconds I have left to do some promotion.

We still have a bill before Parliament that was introduced by my colleague, Yves Lessard, the human resources critic. This is the second time we have tried to get this bill passed. Its purpose is to improve the employment insurance system. The vast majority of your recommendations are reflected in this bill. So make the MPs in your provinces aware of women's needs, because I would say that the vast majority of people the act discriminates against are women.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Deschamps.

Ms. O'Neill-Gordon.

[English]

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon (Miramichi, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, witnesses, for being with us today. I certainly appreciate your taking the time to be with us.

My first question is for Verna Heinrichs.

I want to first congratulate you on your positive attitude towards helping women and towards how we will make use of the money that our government has been putting into helping women. Sometimes women need to see a more positive attitude in how we work with this money and make things happen for women, rather than just being made to feel that we are always being put down. I know our government wants to help women in the workforce. We have put in lots of money under our economic plan.

So I would like you to explain how you feel that your positive attitude towards women helps them to become more involved and to really want to do their best. That is what I see as a teacher. I feel that if you're going to help the ladies, it is going to be by doing it with a positive attitude all the way, and so I would like you to explain that to us.

Mrs. Verna Heinrichs: Thank you so much. I really feel that positivity, especially when it comes to attitude and work ethic, is so catching.

I have worked with many different areas of women's concerns, rural women's concerns. As I said earlier, immigration and settlement services is a huge area where there is a lot of opportunity for women to really be down about themselves. They are thrown into a completely new environment, and their skills and professional degrees from elsewhere are not necessarily recognized. In fact, often they are not. I have seen a lot of opportunities for women to help other women, to give them a hand up to really progress well and further their education and make their skills more marketable.

I was the regional manager of a community college enveloping a catchment area of six school divisions. I have worked with many of these women first-hand. I have worked with them to help them either qualify for other jobs that they have chosen in careers or requalifying in this country. These are incredibly huge areas that I feel this government is doing a very good job with.

Also, in regard to employment and finance and education and health care, so many of these, even though they seem separate or segregated, are really very much intertwined, and one often helps with the other. The education and retraining that is needed through education, and when women receive employment insurance benefits, these are all things that benefit their children and their families. Their spouses also benefit, but the children especially, and I feel this is really critical.

As well, I had mentioned increasing funding to the status of women program to the highest level ever, a 42% increase. This is remarkable and so much needed for rural women—and the shifting focus of going to the grassroots level organization. Every strong house that stands straight and true is built on a strong foundation, and this exactly helps women in rural areas and women throughout Canada. The funding has been increased to in excess of \$1.3 million. I would just like to see these programs come along. Alberta and British Columbia are good templates to start...and learn what is working for them and working well for them and move some of these other programs further east.

I see a lot of things, a lot of help from the government truly wanting to help women. And the accessibility, I believe, is very much there for women, because the statistics will demonstrate that the highest percentage of EI recipients are indeed women. The statistics speak for themselves when it comes to maternity leave and benefits, the parental leave benefits as well.

These are areas of great access, as well as on-the-job benefits for when women are retraining for other jobs and other careers. I have experienced it and worked with these women first-hand, be it in a college setting or working with immigration and settlement services and other areas of education, as well as working with them in regard to finance and just setting up a household and building a new life

here, as well as helping other women in rural areas do the same. It's not just for immigrant women, it's for Canadian women, period.

● (1220)

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon: But immigrant women do have a little more of a challenge—

Mrs. Verna Heinrichs: Added challenge, absolutely.

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon: —and I feel that a positive attitude and working with you gives them an uplift. So I congratulate you for that.

Mrs. Verna Heinrichs: Thank you so much.

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon: Thank you for a great job.

Mrs. Verna Heinrichs: Thank you.

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon: I want to address this to Marie White.

Thank you for sharing your story. I would like to reassure you that our government is working to improve the lives of Canadian women. That is why just lately we have invested \$75 million for the construction of social housing units.

Recently we had a witness, a disabled lady in Alberta, and she had talked about the conditions at home. I'm wondering, what are the living conditions like right now for women with disabilities, and how will this investment of \$75 million for construction help the ladies with disabilities in your community?

Ms. Marie White: I have worked on housing and homelessness in St. John's for the last eight years, since the homelessness program was created. For women with disabilities, the issue stems from the fact that most of them would never be able to afford their own house because they can't work and they live in poverty.

It's a good start, and I was very pleased to see this funding. I can be positive sometimes. I was very pleased to see the investment in social housing. It is an area that was taken away quite abruptly some years ago, I believe in the mid-nineties, and it created the homelessness problem we have today.

The issue, more broadly, is that all government policies should have inclusion and accessibility principles tied to them to ensure that at the outset, as opposed to retrofits, the women you reference are able to avail themselves of the housing provided.

● (1225)

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you. That's the end of it.

Now, Ms. Mathysen, please.

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank all the witnesses. The information you've provided is absolutely essential to our study.

I'd like to begin with Ms. Heinrichs. On your discussion about the need for optimism and the importance of giving women that opportunity, that hand up, in terms of that hand up, is advocacy for women important? Is that something we should make sure is in place?

Mrs. Verna Heinrichs: Absolutely. I feel advocacy for women is critical. As women, we need to be supportive of each other. We need to build each other up and work with each other. We need to educate ourselves, qualify for improved skills, build ourselves up, and build good lives. Because when you're helping women, invariably you are helping their children. This is critical. And when you help women and their children, families benefit. You're helping everyone.

It makes a huge difference for communities, be they rural or urban.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: And as government, we need to know how to effectively help women. So is the kind of research in our communities that tells us specifically what women and communities need something we should be supporting too?

Mrs. Verna Heinrichs: I feel that research is critical. We need to keep moving forward. As I said earlier, one of the things is being a chameleon. We need to change with our environment and with the needs of changing times.

This is something I feel has really been critical. I feel this government is very honestly trying to help with this. As evidenced here today, they are looking for direction and they are open-minded on this. They have been working to implement some changes to further benefit women and families.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Should women be lobbying for other women as well, in bringing that message to government? Is lobbying important too?

Mrs. Verna Heinrichs: Who better than women lobbying for other women? I think that's very important. And I think advocacy and positive women in advisory capacities are all critical. We need to work at that.

I really have to commend the Status of Women for refocusing to do this at the grassroots level. This is so important, because there are many women out there who truly have their fingers on the pulse of what's happening in their own communities. We need to listen and help, which is exactly what they're doing. They're showing this. They're putting their money where their mouth is. They've increased funding by 42%, which is absolutely remarkable. I really have to commend them on it.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: I'm sorry, I do want to ask questions of other witnesses, but I'm afraid I'm going to have to disagree with you, because advocacy, research, and lobbying are precisely what Status of Women cut in budget 2006. I'm glad you support it and I hope you will lobby this government to put it back.

I want to go on. We had a witness, Kathleen Lahey, who is a professor of economics from Queen's University, and she talked about the infrastructure spending and what is happening in terms of this current government investing. According to her statistics, there was no gender equity in that funding. All these millions and billions of dollars are going to support mainly male-dominated jobs like construction and trades, and women will not benefit because the social infrastructure, the child care, the expanded affordable housing, and employment insurance have not been funded.

I heard this morning on the news that at the G20 there's going to be a discussion about a shift. Instead of stimulus funding, there's going to be a discussion about changing our social structures. I

would hope that includes changing the social structures we've been talking about. I'm wondering if any of you, or all of you, would like to comment on the feminization of the lack of stimulus and that need for structural change.

• (1230)

Ms. Marie White: If I could be so bold, I suggest that when policies are made, sometimes it's the implementation and the practice that we find lacking. It's not just one lens but many lenses that are required. It is not just the gender lens; I will say quite clearly that it is a disability lens, an immigrant lens. We have to make sure that when we create policies—and I agree with you that the stimulus package is very focused, it's clearly bricks and mortar, get our shovels ready—unless it's done within the context of a social policy framework and a government that is not afraid of advocacy and being challenged, if I could be so bold again to pick up on your comment...because it's the challenge that stimulates the creativity.

Ms. Lucille Harper: Living in a rural area, I'm never opposed to good roads. I just have to say that.

However, having said that, what has happened in our rural communities with the loss of social infrastructure, as I said earlier, is that we've really lost the kinds of jobs that support women. So when we're moving out our schools, our small health clinics, our grocery stores, when we're moving out so many of those essential supports—our community services workers, EI offices, etc., many of which are staffed by women and many of which are decent paying jobs—we're really removing some of those opportunities for women.

Investing in social infrastructure is one of the best ways to bring women into a labour market at decent fair wages and to enable women to support their families. I absolutely agree that a good house has a good foundation. The foundations of most houses I know are the women who live in them. So we really need to absolutely support women and support women where they are in their communities.

If we want to talk about stimulation, one other thing we could really do is eliminate student debt or at least reduce student debt. Why not \$5,000 per degree, maximum? That way we're really freeing our young people up to be able to stay in their communities. One of the reasons we're seeing the out-migration of our youth is that they have to go where they can afford to pay off their student debt, if they've been able to access education. That hasn't been rural Nova Scotia for sure, or probably other rural communities either. So all that will enable women and youth to stay and build.

With respect to lenses, yes, I think we need a number of different lenses. Gender impacts everybody, and if you're a woman with disabilities you're more severely impacted, and it's the same with immigrants. It's the same across the board. That's why that's an overarching piece.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Harper and Ms. Mathysen.

I would like to thank all the witnesses who came here today. You gave very interesting and fulsome presentations. I know it will help us with our report.

Now I would like to end this session and move in camera.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

- _____ (Pause) _____

- [Public proceedings resume]

- (1235)

The Chair: We have a notice of motion from March 20 from Irene Mathysen. I don't know if you have it with you, but it reads:

That the Standing Committee on the Status of Women immediately hold four extra meetings to examine the Public Sector Equitable Compensation Act and invite Minister Vic Toews, the Public Sector Labour Relations Board, Public Service Alliance of Canada, Professional Institute of the Public Sector of Canada, Communications Energy and Paperworkers, Canadian Labour Congress and Marie-Therese Chicha, Pay Equity Task Force Member and any other witnesses that the committee agrees upon.

Now, Ms. Mathysen.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Yes, Madam Chair. I don't know—

The Chair: Actually, before you speak, I know there was a discussion the last time—and I do have some information on this for the committee—that the Senate has been looking at this issue, but not in a fulsome way. It just listened to about four or five witnesses when it did this particular work.

What we do know is that on March 12, 2009, the Public Sector Equitable Compensation Act was referred to the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights. Also, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance heard from four witnesses on extending the Budget Implementation Act, 2009, and it also discussed the Public Sector Equitable Compensation Act. On March 10 and 11, the Standing Senate Committee on National Finance heard from several witnesses on its study of the Budget Implementation Act. And the following witness discussed the Public Sector Equitable Compensation Act, and that was Hélène Lauréndeau.

I point this out just so you have the information. This was distributed to the committee, actually.

Now, Ms. Mathysen.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I did indeed read those notes, and it struck me that although the Senate had looked at Bill C-10 and perhaps brushed part of the issue around the Equitable Compensation Act, it hadn't been given the full discussion it required.

Based on the response we're hearing across the women's community, and the concerns raised, and our obligation as a committee to examine issues that impact women and to be their voice in this Parliament, I believe it is incumbent upon us to take a little bit of time to hear about the impact this bill is having and what the consequences are, as they roll out, for women. I think that's our job, Madam Chair. I believe it will not detract from our other study. It will be four extra meetings, and there are precedents for having extra meetings. I think this is too important an issue to allow any minor concern to get in the way of our doing what I perceive to be our job.

- (1240)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Mathysen.

Ms. Davidson.

Mrs. Patricia Davidson (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I know that we had some extensive discussions on this at one of our previous meetings. We did talk about the different committees that had looked at this and the employees who had appeared before the committee, and so on. I don't want to belabour this, and you have elaborated on it a bit more.

The reality is that we did set the scope of the study that we were going to do. This was not part of it. I think that trying to hold four extra meetings would be overkill, for lack of a better word. I think we need to continue with the work plan we have in place. Certainly if this can be worked in at the end, as we said at the last meeting, then it should be put on the agenda to be continued at the end of our studies. But I think we need to continue with what we have in front of us right now.

The Chair: Is there any further discussion?

Go ahead, Ms. Hoepfner.

Ms. Candice Hoepfner (Portage—Lisgar, CPC): Thank you very much.

I would concur with my colleague. Unfortunately, if we take this and put it in the mix now, because there may be other topics we decide might be of interest or might be important, I think it would disturb what we've already decided. We would almost have to go back and start from scratch, because things are changing and moving very quickly. I think the wise thing may be for us to continue with the plan we decided on and then see if we can add it at the end.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Neville.

Hon. Anita Neville: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I certainly would support Ms. Mathysen's motion, but I wonder... Anecdotally, we've all been receiving comments and reports from individuals and groups in terms of the impact of this legislation. But I'm wondering if Ms. Mathysen would be willing to remove the word "four" and just leave it at "extra meetings". If we can do it in two, so be it. My real concern is simply the time factor and how we're going to be able to work something like this in. I support it in principle, but I just question whether we have to have the word "four" in there.

The Chair: Are you going to move an amendment, or would you rather Ms. Mathysen...?

Hon. Anita Neville: I would rather do it as a friendly amendment and see whether Ms. Mathysen has any comment.

The Chair: We'll go to Ms. Mathysen.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: By virtue of the number of groups and individuals I had hoped to hear from, it seemed that four was rather a minimum. I'm concerned that if we just leave it open—as “some”—we may end up with none, because there'll always be something coming up, some objection that gets in the way. For example, we wanted to hear from government witnesses last week, on Tuesday. A vote came up, there were problems, and consequently we didn't hear from them. I don't know when we will hear from them, and I think it's an opportunity lost.

So I have some concerns about leaving it open-ended. I can foresee this being an opportunity lost, when it is an issue that is front and centre with so many of the women's groups we represent as a committee.

• (1245)

The Chair: Ms. Mathysen obviously does not agree.

Ms. Neville, do you want to move that as an amendment, or will you leave it as it is?

Hon. Anita Neville: Let me think for a minute.

The Chair: All right. We'll go to Ms. Zarac.

[Translation]

Mrs. Lise Zarac (LaSalle—Émard, Lib.): I would just like to say that the committee should not be inflexible. It should be flexible. I agree that we did not put this topic on the agenda initially, but some situations force us to change direction, and priorities emerge.

In my opinion, pay equity is a very high priority. I believe we should discuss it.

[English]

The Chair: Go ahead, Madame Demers.

[Translation]

Ms. Nicole Demers (Laval, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

The last time we talked about this, we stated our positions in part in relation to Ms. Mathysen's motion. The main reason why we wanted to hold these meetings was that the minister had indicated that he had relied on programs in place elsewhere and that he felt it was the best way and the best solution.

I will also remind you that Kevin Lynch recently tabled his 16th report to the President of the Treasury Board. That report also talks about the fragility of public sector jobs and the fact that women tend to be the victims of fragile employment in the public sector. The sooner we can provide them with pay equity, the better.

Lastly, I want to make sure we will have all the information we need to be able to act.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Ms. O'Neill-Gordon.

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon: I feel that we should put this probably to the end, if we have time at the end. Let's go ahead with what we have planned and then see what we have at the end, if we have time. Some of these topics are going to be covered as we go along anyway, I feel.

The Chair: Ms. Hoepfner.

Ms. Candice Hoepfner: I want to say two things. I was just going to respectfully disagree with Ms. Zarac, because she indicated that this was a priority now. But for some of us, we felt that we had already discussed our priorities and what we should do. If we throw this into the mix at this point, we almost have to open it up for everybody. For example, in my riding they really love the issue of women in non-traditional roles, and they want to know how they can advance that. That ended up not being one of our top topics. But do you understand? Once we open it up to re-prioritize, it opens it right up.

My other question—

The Chair: Ms. Hoepfner, I have some information for you.

Ms. Candice Hoepfner: Sure.

The Chair: Women in non-traditional occupations is third on our list of studies, actually.

Ms. Candice Hoepfner: Oh, good. Thank you. That's great. And if we open it up, it may move up a notch.

Madam Mathysen, you mentioned that one of the challenges would be timing, so that the different witnesses you were hoping to bring in would be able to come in on those meetings.

To anyone here who could answer this, is it fairly easy to get in the deputy minister and some of those people? Maybe we could bring them in and have them answer at least some of the questions. Maybe we could set aside one of our regular sessions and bring in some of the department officials. At least we would know, during our regular meetings.... We're here, obviously; there's not going to be, hopefully, any votes. Hopefully we can arrange schedules.

That's just a suggestion. I'm not sure if that would come in the form of an amendment. But maybe we could bring them in.

The Chair: I think Ms. Mathysen's motion does not state specifically when. She just would like to hold four extra meetings and doesn't say specifically when. It would be within the course of this committee's hearings.

Ms. Candice Hoepfner: It could be a regular meeting.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: It would be between now and June. That's quite a length of time. Certainly I have no wish to re-prioritize the business of this committee.

The Chair: Ms. Zarac.

[Translation]

Mrs. Lise Zarac: I would just like to mention that when I say pay equity is a priority, it is because, during their testimony, several witnesses talked about it in connection with the issue we are looking at. That is why I am saying it is a priority, because it came up several times. We need to take the time to really analyze it, and I echo Ms. Demers' argument that there is something we do not understand. We are told that what is in the budget at present is similar to what already exists in other provinces. We would like to look at this and understand it better. That is why I would like us to discuss it.

• (1250)

[English]

The Chair: Ms. Hoepfner again, and then Ms. Neville.

Ms. Candice Hoepfner: I would like to propose an amendment, if I could, that we decide to have one session at this point, and we invite the officials from the department to come, and we can question them on this issue.

The Chair: We have an amendment on the floor.

Would you like to put that in some form of writing for me, please, Ms. Hoepfner?

Ms. Candice Hoepfner: Sure.

The Chair: Until we get to that, I think Ms. Neville wanted to say something.

Hon. Anita Neville: This will be very brief, Madam Chair.

I'm not going to propose an amendment. I'd be prepared to go with the four meetings. I do want to comment, though, on the fact that sometimes we have to be flexible in our agenda. I appreciate that we have prioritized issues, but sometimes issues emerge that require a response, or that should have a response. This one came up after, I think, we prioritized our work plan.

So I have no problem with it. In fact, I may be bringing forward another issue myself.

The Chair: Ms. Hoepfner, do you have the amendment?

I think we have discussed this issue, so we can call the vote on it. We have another motion to deal with.

Ms. Candice Hoepfner: I'm just about finished.

The Chair: I just want to remind the committee that there had been some form of consensus that we would remove the word "immediately".

So the amendment would read.... This is not an amendment. It really is a whole new motion.

Ms. Candice Hoepfner: Sorry, I couldn't....

The Chair: You're replacing all of names here with....

Ms. Hoepfner is suggesting, or amending, that we remove everything from the words "and invite Minister Vic Toews" all the way down to the word "upon". As well, we would remove "hold four extra meetings".

The amendment would thus be that the Standing Committee on the Status of Women hold one meeting and invite departmental officials regarding pay equity.

Ms. Candice Hoepfner: I'm sorry, I can't write the amendment in 30 seconds. Basically, you understand the concept of what I'm proposing. If you'd like me to prepare an amendment, I would need a little more time.

The Chair: I just said what your amendment did.

Ms. Candice Hoepfner: Well, I'm asking for one—

The Chair: It removed all of those other people. You are suggesting "department officials", so you are not inviting the minister or any of the other people who constituted the bulk of the original motion.

Mrs. Patricia Davidson: But she wasn't changing "to examine the Public Sector Equitable Compensation Act". You said something different in there.

The Chair: No, I said "and invite Minister Toews" was going to be removed in her amendment, up to the word "upon".

Ms. Candice Hoepfner: And "Public Sector Equitable Compensation Act" is—

The Chair: That is before "and invite Minister Toews".

Ms. Candice Hoepfner: Madam Chair, I apologize. I wrote it out very quickly, and I would like to retain the reference to the Public Sector Equitable Compensation Act. That's basically what we're looking at.

The Chair: In that case, the amendment, as I said before, reads: "That the Standing Committee on the Status of Women hold one meeting"—instead of four—"to examine the Public Sector Equitable Compensation Act". Then everything is removed from the words "invite Minister Vic Toews" till "agrees upon" and replaced by "invite departmental officials".

Ms. Candice Hoepfner: I would like time to prepare a written copy of the amendment and bring it back for next time.

The Chair: Well, this motion was moved to be dealt with today.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Madam Chair, we've been dealing with this since last week, and this is the third time that it's come forward. I'd simply like a decision on it. I think it's time for one.

• (1255)

The Chair: Do you have a point of order?

Ms. Candice Hoepfner: Yes, I would like to have a properly written amendment. Obviously it's not going to be properly written in 25 seconds.

The Chair: Usually, Ms. Hoepfner, when people make an amendment on a motion that's on the floor, they do it at the time. We don't bring it back another day. The amendment is one that you have said you wanted to put in, and it is simple.

Ms. Candice Hoepfner: We don't bring amendments back?

The Chair: Not if we're trying to deal with this motion, which has come back and back again. We need to deal with this motion; we can't keep bringing it back.

May I make a suggestion with regard to your amendment?

Ms. Candice Hoepfner: Yes.

The Chair: The motion as it stands is “That the Standing Committee on the Status of Women hold four extra meetings”, and Ms. Hoepfner would replace the words “four extra meetings” with “one meeting to examine the Public Sector Equitable Compensation Act and invite departmental officials.”

Mrs. Patricia Davidson: I believe she said “Treasury Board officials”.

The Chair: “Treasury Board officials”, then, and everything else is removed—the Public Sector Labour Relations Board, the Public Service Alliance, etc.

Let us vote on the amendment. Those in favour of the amendment? Those opposed?

Well, I guess the chair will have to vote. I will vote for the status quo; I will vote against the amendment.

(Amendment negatived)

The Chair: Now, we will read the motion as it stands: “That the Standing Committee on the Status of Women...”.

Do I need to repeat it? We all know it. Can we call a vote?

Those in favour of the motion as it stands? Those opposed?

We're back to the same old thing of the chair breaking the tie. I vote in favour of the motion.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: I would like to explain why I voted as I did, because I think the chair should explain why she did what she did.

In the first instance, I voted for the status quo. In the second instance, I have sat here and heard many witnesses come and ask for a full look at this issue, so I feel that we are listening to the witnesses when this theme comes up.

We recognize, however, that Ms. Mathysen has said this can be done at any time before June, and she does not wish to bump anything off the list that we originally agreed on. I would just like you to know what those themes are. The first one is a study of the effects that the current employment insurance programs have on the women in Canada. That's what we're just finishing. The second is a study on the effects of new technologies on women and girls. That will be three weeks. A study on increasing the participation of women in non-traditional occupations will be three weeks. A gender-based analysis of the budget, with a focus on infrastructure funding and job creation for women, will be two weeks. A study on media coverage of women and women's issues will be two weeks. A study on international models of early childhood education will be three weeks.

I don't know where that brings us to.

Hon. Anita Neville: August.

The Chair: Well then, I'll have to let you know.

We have a motion from Madam Demers on the table now. It reads:

That the Standing Committee on the Status of Women call upon the government to condemn the excommunication, approved by the Vatican, of the nine-year-old Brazilian girl who had to undergo an abortion after being raped by her stepfather;

that the government also condemn the excommunication of the little girl's mother and of the medical team who carried out the abortion; that the Committee report this motion to the House.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nicole Demers: Madam Chair, we have all heard about this situation in recent weeks. The story made headlines around the world. Many people have criticized the Vatican's position. The Vatican stated that even though the situation was unusual, abortion automatically meant excommunication. The Vatican did not condemn the fact that these people were excommunicated, but the fact that the events were made public. The story made headlines around the world. I find this deplorable. The life of a little nine-year-old girl is threatened, and it is implied that her life is less important than the life of the fetus she is carrying. I believe that her life is very important, and I find it unfortunate that this nine-year-old girl, her mother and the members of the medical team were excommunicated.

No matter what church officials said, the Vatican, through Monsignor Fisichella, stated that performing an abortion meant automatic excommunication. The Vatican did not feel that this automatic decision should be so widely publicized. What the Vatican condemned was the fact that Monsignor Cardoso Sobrinho talked to the press about it. That is abominable.

● (1300)

[*English*]

The Chair: Mesdames, discussion?

Madam Davidson.

Mrs. Patricia Davidson: It is certainly a horrendous situation that has happened here, but I'm hearing some differing opinions and some different scenarios as to what has happened. Because I have really not had enough time to look into the matter fully, I would ask that this motion be tabled so that we can get more background information, if possible, please.

I put forth a tabling motion, which I believe needs to be voted on.

The Chair: It needs no debate. Thank you.

So we will table the motion. Would you have a time? Maybe in the next meeting?

Mrs. Patricia Davidson: I think you have to vote on it, don't you?

The Chair: No, you don't usually have to vote on tabling.

Is there anyone who disagrees with the tabling of this motion?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nicole Demers: Madam Chair, it should not be put off indefinitely, though. We need to determine exactly when we could discuss the motion. If we could do that on Thursday during the first part of the meeting, that would be very much appreciated. Three days should give us enough time to form an opinion.

[*English*]

The Chair: I had originally asked Ms. Davidson if she had a timeline. Should we bring it back at the next meeting?

Mrs. Patricia Davidson: My motion would be to have it tabled until we got background information. I would think we should be able to have that by Thursday.

The Chair: On Thursday, we have the deputy minister and six witnesses. That should take up the whole meeting, Madam Demers. I'm sure you can get us the background information we seek.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nicole Demers: Yes.

[*English*]

The Chair: We can do that on Thursday, April 2.

I need to get a sense from the committee on this. We have two meetings on Thursday. One is to accommodate the extra meeting with the academics that was cancelled because of the vote. We will

then have the ordinary meeting. We could deal with this before the academic round table, provided that Ms. Demers gives us the information that Ms. Davidson is seeking.

Is that okay with you, Ms. Demers?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nicole Demers: That should not be a problem, Madam Chair. Once we have the information, the debate should not take long.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you. I think that's it. I would remind everyone that we'll have a full morning starting at 9 o'clock on April 2.

The meeting is adjourned.

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